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Durenberger backs Contra aid

By Thomas D. Brandt
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Sen. David Durenberger, the new chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee who has criticized the CIA program of covert aid to the rebels fighting to overthrow the Marxist government of Nicaragua, said yesterday that the United States should help the rebels openly.

Sen. Durenberger told The Washington Times in an interview that the Nicaraguan government is preparing an offensive this year to wipe out the Contra rebels.

Regardless of the outcome of that effort, however, Sen. Durenberger agrees with the Reagan administration that it is in the U.S. national interest to continue pressuring the Nicaraguans.

His disagreement with the White House is over the negative effects of CIA covert operations that now are well-known.

While Mr. Durenberger's view supports U.S. goals in that region, it could shift the debate in Congress away from covert operations and toward ways to press for democratic reforms in other nations.

The new chairman — a Republican from Minnesota — said he is eliminating all subcommittees, taking over all staff hiring, and taking the panel "back to basics"

because nine of the 15 members are new this year.

In Central America, however, he wants a greater U.S. investment in intelligence gathering to make up for years of neglect but a shift from "covert" to "overt" methods to achieve policy goals.

"I expect that someplace during the course of '85 that the Sandinistas — I mean they're already gearing up — will gear up to try to get rid of the FDN," he said. FDN is the Spanish acronym for the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the main body of anti-Sandinista rebels.

"I expect that there will be some kind of an effort to try to move the FDN out," he added, citing as one example the acquisition by the Sandinistas of Soviet helicopter gunships.

When asked to compare his support for overt aid to his opposition to the Reagan administration's covert aid to the Contras, he said, "I just said don't use the CIA to do it. I'm all for supporting the Contras... overtly."

"That's where we come up against the problem of how would you do it?" He said one problem is that under international law open support for a military operation can be tantamount to a declaration of war.

Mr. Durenberger said he had no dollar amount in mind and that it was not his position to recommend details for an overt program. But at one point, he referred to the effect of U.S. military maneuvers in Honduras.

However, the CIA efforts have poisoned U.S. domestic support for Reagan administration programs in Nicaragua, the senator said. The CIA program also stiffened anti-U.S. sentiment among Nicaraguans and weakened the standing of moderates in the Sandinista government competing for power with the Marxists, he added.

He said that U.S. pressure was necessary to push the Nicaraguans into negotiations and democratic liberalization and that he would support an overt program with that goal even if the FDN were out of the picture.

Mr. Durenberger, who met privately this week with the Reagan administration's special envoy to Nicaragua, Harry Shlaudeman, said he did not know if the White House planned to change its strategy in Congress and ask for an overt aid program due to resistance to a resumption of covert aid.

"That, I wish I knew. I don't know," the senator said.

Last year, Congress voted a freeze on funds for the Contras, pending additional votes early this year, with many observers on Capitol Hill believing the measure has little chance of clearing the Democratic-controlled House in particular.

Like Mr. Durenberger, the new chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Ind., is

critical of the covert CIA program against Nicaragua that started in 1981.

Sen. Durenberger said that whether the administration uses covert or overt pressure should be decided on the floor of the Senate and that he does not want to "politicize" his committee with hearings seeking to build a record against covert aid.

Even if there were not a Sandinista push against the Contras, the senator added, "I would support it [an open aid program] just to support the negotiations... I think they [the Sandinistas] still worry a lot about us."

"Even eliminating — if they were successful in eliminating the FDN — it wouldn't relieve all their worries. Every time you move 3,000 [U.S.] Army National Guardsmen into Honduras, it will worry them sick. You always have some negotiating power there, but you need enough to push them into realistic negotiations, to deal with us or with the Contadora."

The Contadora is a regional peace negotiation, led by Panama, Mexico, Venezuela and Columbia, that has

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sought accords for removing foreign military forces from the region, securing the sanctity of national borders and stopping the flow of arms across borders.

"Every time something goes wrong down there, whether it's Teddy Kennedy and his atrocity line, or whatever it is, the American public confuses the policy with the CIA," Sen. Durenberger said.

Although there are bilateral negotiations between Sandinista officials and Mr. Shlaudeman and efforts on the Contadora process, "the front page news is something about atrocities, or something about manuals," he said.

Some senators have called for hearings on allegations of atrocities committed by the FDN within Nicaragua. Another controversy erupted in Congress last fall over a CIA-produced manual for the Contras that some observers claimed advocated political assassinations.

Because of the anti-U.S. sentiment built up over the CIA operations, Mr. Durenberger said the moderates in the Sandinista hierarchy "aren't calling the shots anymore. When it comes down to deciding who goes to the meetings and who gets to sign off on the proposal, or whatever it is, the Borge-Arce kind of faction is the strong one."

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He was referring to Tomas Borge Martinez, minister of the interior, and Bayardo Arce, a member of the

Sandinista directorate, both viewed as Marxist-Leninist hardliners.

"All they needed was to put an

Uncle Sam mask on their problems and they confused the people enough," Sen. Durenberger said.



Photo by Richard Kozak The Washington Times

Intelligence Committee Chairman David Durenberger